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theater

Argentine ballet finds city boy in the country

By Tom Jacobs
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A young man from the city moves to a rural area, where he finds he does not fit in. He does not understand the local customs (including clothing), and he is clumsy at such basic tasks as working the fields. He becomes the victim of much ridicule and hazing.

Will the peasant girl he has his eye on return his affection? Will he learn to assimilate to his new surroundings?

Yes, it sounds like the premise of a reality TV series. In fact, it's the plot of "Estancia," a 1941 ballet by Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera. The State Street Ballet will dance the work Saturday night and Sunday afternoon in the Lobero Theatre, as part of the citywide Tango and Malambo Festival.

"This was a true collaboration in the best sense," said Rodney Gustafson, the ballet company's artistic director. "Gisèle (Ben-Dor, the festival's artistic director) proposed it about a year ago, and I loved the idea from the beginning. She is so full of passion for what she's doing, she's like a live wire."

"Estancia" is the major malambo-inspired work of the festival. The malambo is the folk music and dance of rural Argentina and Uruguay, and it was only natural that Ginastera incorporated its rhythms into this story, which could be subtitled "the education of a gaucho."

Although a suite of dances from the work is reasonably well-known, the complete ballet is a rarity. Ben-Dor made the first-ever recording of the unabridged work in 1998, with the London Symphony. To her knowledge, this is the first time the ballet has been staged in its entirety.



"You'll see elements of malambo throughout the piece," says Jimmy Gamonet, a virtuoso malambo dancer from Argentina and choreographer of "Estancia."



DAVID BAZEMORE
Nicole Grand and David Fonnegra
dance in "Estancia."

It appears to be in good hands. Jimmy Gamonet, the Miami City Ballet veteran who was hired to choreograph the ballet, grew up in Peru. Roberto Tata, who will serve as a sort of narrator, is a virtuoso malambo dancer from Argentina.

"He educated me in the vocabulary of the malambo," Gamonet said. "As a choreographer, you look at it and see how you can manipulate it so that you keep the essence within the form of classical dance.

"You'll see elements of malambo throughout the piece. Then when he performs, you'll see the real thing."

The program will begin with a short work Gustafson choreographed to Igor Stravinsky's "Tango." It also features two works by William Soleau: a contemporary ballet set to Argentine songs of love and death and a signature work of his, "Nuevo Tango," set to music of Astor Piazzolla.

"When I think of tango, I think of alleyways and smoke-filled barrooms where people are watching each other," said Soleau. "That's the type of feel I tried to give the ballet. There are 10 dancers and 10 stools; nobody leaves the stage for the half-hour ballet."

"Tango is so passionate," he noted. "It incorporates everything from jealousy to sorrow to love to loss. These relationships build throughout the ballet."

Although the dancers are on pointe, Soleau incorporated elements of traditional tango dancing into his choreography, including leg kicks and equality of the sexes.

"In a traditional tango, the women are as strong as the men," he noted. "That's the way it's done in the ballet."